



United States Department of Agriculture
Forest Service

Recreation Realignment Project

Draft Environmental Assessment

**Big Piney Ranger District, Ozark-St. Francis National Forests, Newton, Pope and Johnson
Counties, Arkansas
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Chapter I

Purpose and Need for Action

The U.S. Forest Service, Big Piney Ranger District Ozark-St. Francis National Forests (OSFNFs), is considering changing the recreation management of Haw Creek Campground, Bayou Bluff Campground, and Alum Cove Recreation Area.

An environmental assessment (EA) has been prepared to document the evaluation of use at each of these recreational facilities and the opportunities offered to the public and to determine whether implementation of reducing amenities, investments and maintenance costs in order to improve higher-use sites may significantly affect the quality of the human environment, thereby, requiring the preparation of an environmental impact statement (EIS). By preparing this EA, agency policy and direction to comply with the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) is being fulfilled. For more details of the proposed action, see the Proposed Action and Alternatives section of this document.

A. Location of Project Area

The project areas are the established boundaries of these three developed recreational areas. Haw Creek Campground is located along Arkansas Highway 123 approximately one mile west of the Fort Douglas Big Piney Bridge; Bayou Bluff Campground is along Arkansas Highway 27 approximately seven miles north of Hector, Arkansas; and Alum Cove Recreation Area is located three miles north of Deer, Arkansas.

B. Need for the Proposal

This project is proposed to meet the periodic and short duration stays of most recreational users, reduce cost and maintenance, and maintain the character of these areas while providing quality and sustainable developed recreation opportunities by focusing on maintenance of sites with moderate to high use. The goal is to reduce the number of under-utilized developed recreation areas on the National Forests.

Background

Use at Haw Creek and Bayou Bluff Campgrounds has been historically low to extremely low. In addition, Haw Creek Campground is located within the flood plain of Haw Creek and subject to potential flooding. Historically, flooding has been limited to the low water crossing which has at times isolated campers from being able to exit the campground. Since 2012 in order to address the low occupancy rate during the winter (16 weeks) and flooding, the district has been seasonally closing the campgrounds. The winter occupancy rate is near zero.

Given the projected financial and staffing constraints along with visitor usage, the District recreation program recently began to look at what areas were sustainable to maintain. As the District revisited use within Haw Creek and Bayou Bluff, they again were identified as areas where use is low to extremely low.

Alum Cove Natural Bridge Recreation Area includes a day use picnic area with pavilion, a Natural Bridge Special Interest Area (SIA) that highlights the rare geologic structures found

including one of the largest natural bridge in the state, and a series of small bluff shelters/caves along the 1.1 mile National Registered Trail. Historical use shows the primary purpose of visitors is hiking to the natural bridge. Very little time is spent in the day use area.

Management Areas:

The Revised Land and Management Plan (RLRMP or Forest Plan) for the Ozark-St. Francis National Forests describes Desired Conditions for Management Areas (MAs) and the ecological systems that occur within these MAs. The following describes the applicable desired conditions of the MA within this proposed project area:

MA 2C Developed Recreation Areas (RLRMP pages 2-50 to 2-52):

Emphasis - This MA is managed to provide the public with a variety of recreational opportunities in visually appealing and environmentally healthy settings. Facilities are provided to enhance the quality of the recreational experience and to mitigate damage to the affected ecosystems. These areas also serve as “gateways” to the wide diversity of recreation opportunities on the remainder of the Forests.

Desired Condition – Visitors are able to choose from a wide variety of recreation opportunities in high quality, well-maintained settings.

Priorities –

- Supply a variety of recreational facilities that are responsive to user demands.
- Operate developed recreation sites including campsites and picnic areas.
- Focus investments and improve the cost effectiveness of operating recreational facilities by using one or more of the following techniques where feasible:
 - Decommissioning underused sites
 - Maintaining concessionaire agreements
 - Entering into management partnerships
 - Investigating other measures.

Other Developmental Forces:

Decommissioning these facilities would increase the Big Piney Ranger District’s ability to provide better overall recreational facilities for the public at other sites.

RLRMP objectives that support the need of this project:

- 1) MAOBJ.5 - Reduce the recreation facilities maintenance backlog by approximately 10 percent within 3 to 5 years (RLRMP page 2-52).

C. The Proposed Action (PA):

The PA for this project consists of the following activities:

Haw Creek Campground would convert to a point of interest (no fee area, open year round) resulting in removing amenities such as picnic tables, fire rings, lantern posts and trash cans over time as they become unusable or unsafe. Bayou Bluff campground has camp sites on two different levels and access roads. The district is proposing closure of the upper level with

decommissioning of all amenities. The lower level would be managed as a point of interest retaining use of the vault toilet, large pavilion, three shelters, and a small pavilion until they are unusable or unsafe.

The district is proposing to convert Alum Cove Recreation Area to a trail head resulting in removal of a portion of the day use area amenities such as trash cans and grills. Amenities that would remain open with limited maintenance until they are unusable or unsafe would be: a pavilion, parking area, Trail with benches, and vault toilet. These areas would allow dispersed day use such as picnicking and overnight camping at the previous campgrounds. Trash would be managed by the user as a “pack it in, pack it out” area. No fees would be associated with these sites. The goal at each site would include developing partnerships and volunteers to assume maintenance responsibility of remaining amenities.

D. Objective of the Proposed Action

The objective of the Proposed Action is to decommission underutilized recreational facilities resulting in a reduction in the overall management and maintenance of the Big Piney Ranger District’s (BPRD) recreational program. This would meet the National Forest System’s goal of streamlining recreation by focusing on sites with moderate to high use, the RLRMP’s direction for MA 2C, and the BPRD’s goal of providing better recreational facilities.

E. Related Documents That Influence the Scope of This Proposed Action

The Final Environmental Impact Statement (FEIS) for the Forest Plan compares and analyzes the impacts of a variety of treatments in the RLRMP (pages 1-18 to 1-49). This EA tiers to the following documents: The Revised Land Resource Management Plan and accompanying Environmental Impact Statement for the Ozark-St Francis National Forests (2005).

The RLRMP identifies Forest Wide Standards (pages 3-1 to 3-21) and MA Standards (pages 3-22 to 3-38) that would be applied to all methods of management. This direction is incorporated into this EA’s design criteria.

The District Sustainable Recreation Strategy

F. Issues Eliminated from Further Study/Not Analyzed as an Alternative

These issues were identified through scoping and are addressed, but are not considered as “issues studied in detail”. The following are the reasons for which they were eliminated from further study.

Upgrade and improve Alum Cove parking area and water system - this idea was brought forward by the interdisciplinary team (IDT). This would likely increase the overall use of this area, it was not considered in detail because it doesn’t meet the RLRMP’s MAOBJ.5 objective to reduce the recreation facilities maintenance backlog by approximately 10 percent within 3 to 5 years (RLRMP page 2-52).

Improve Haw Creek access, upgrade developed day use area, and add fees for day use - this issue was brought forward by a member of the IDT. Users visiting the water fall, is a short duration use, generally less than four hours and doesn’t meet the intent of the objectives.

Jurisdictional Wetlands- Analysis conducted by district personnel has concluded that there are no documented jurisdictional wetlands within or adjacent to the project. Haw Creek and Bayou Bluff are within riparian corridors but not classified as wetlands.

Civil Rights and Minority Groups- The proposed actions would impact minority groups in the same manner as all other groups in society. The proposed actions would not violate the civil rights of consumers or minority groups.

Effects on Soil, Water, Air, Vegetation Management, Wildlife, Aquatics, Threatened and Endangered and Sensitive Species, and Climate Change were eliminated; the proposed changes would decrease the foot print on the ground at each recreation site without limiting visitor use. The effects of the proposed action would not be measurable or quantifiable. Ground disturbance associated with the proposed action would be minor such as removal of lantern posts and picnic tables.

G. Decision to Be Made

The District Ranger would select one of the following and determine if the selection would or would not significantly affect the quality of the human environment.

1. Management actions described in the Proposed Action (PA).
2. Decision not to implement any action by selecting Alternative 1 (the No Action Alternative).
3. Management actions described in the PA with some modifications.

Chapter II

Alternatives Including the Proposed Action

A. Process Used to Develop the Alternatives

The Interdisciplinary Team (IDT) represents the range of resources across the Forests, such as recreation, timber, wildlife, soils, water, and air. The IDT considered the following elements when they developed the alternatives for this analysis:

- The goals, objectives, and desired future conditions for the project area as outlined in the RLRMP for the Ozark–St. Francis National Forests.
- Comments received from the public, State, and other agencies during the scoping process.
- The laws, regulations, and policies that govern land management on national forests.

B. Alternatives Considered

The Proposed Action and The No Action Alternative were developed for this EA based on IDT meetings and public interaction.

The Proposed Action (PA)

The PA for this project consists of the following activities:

Haw Creek Campground

- ❖ Haw Creek Campground would be converted to a point of interest resulting in the removal of fees associated with this area.
- ❖ Replacement of the current sign on Highway 123 with a point of interest sign.
- ❖ Removal of the following amenities includes all rock or concrete pads associated with the improvements. All areas with exposed soil would be seeded and fertilized.
- ❖ Camping amenities including but not limited to: picnic tables, fire rings, lantern posts, trash bins would be removed over time as they become unusable or unsafe.

Amenities that would remain open with limited maintenance would be:

Bathroom facility. The current bathroom facility would be retained until no longer cost effective to maintain. It would then be decommissioned.

Bayou Bluff Campground

Camp sites associated on two different levels and accesses (upper and lower).

- ❖ Bayou Bluff Campground would be converted to a point of interest resulting in the removal of fees.

Upper Level

- ❖ Closure and removal of the following amenities including all rock or concrete pads associated with the improvements. All areas with exposed soil would be seeded and fertilized.
 - Camping amenities including but not limited to: picnic tables, fire rings, lantern posts, trash bins.
 - Bathroom facility. The vault toilet would be decommissioned. The remaining hole would be filled in and the exposed soil seeded and fertilized.
 - Decommission well/remove faucets (no water available).
 - Removal of kiosk and fee collection tube.

Lower Level

- ❖ Camping amenities including but not limited to: picnic tables, fire rings, and lantern posts would be removed as they become unusable or unsafe. Historic shelters would remain. Trash bins and pickup would end.
- ❖ Bathroom facility. The current bathroom facility would be retained until no longer cost effective to maintain. It would then be decommissioned.
- ❖ Removal of the kiosk and fee tube. After removal, all holes would be filled and the exposed soil seeded and fertilized.
- ❖ Replacement of the current sign on Highway 27 with a point of interest sign.

Amenities that would remain open with limited maintenance would be:

- ❖ Large pavilion
- ❖ Shelters
- ❖ Small pavilion

Alum Cove

- ❖ Convert Recreation Area to a Trailhead
- ❖ Bathroom facility. The current bathroom facility would be retained until no longer cost effective to maintain. It would then be decommissioned.
- ❖ Remove existing fee station along access road.
- ❖ Remove trash cans and grills.
- ❖ Remove water faucets at pavilion, community water would not be repaired.
- ❖ Replacement of the current sign on Highway 7 and 374 with point of interest signs.

Amenities that would remain open with limited maintenance would be:

- ❖ Pavilion for use on a first come first served basis.
- ❖ Parking.
- ❖ Trail with benches.
- ❖ Construction of a new kiosk and registration box at the trail head parking area.

These areas would allow for dispersed day use such as picnicking. Overnight camping would be allowed at the previous campsites. Trash would be managed as a “pack it in, pack it out” area.

No fees would be associated with these sites. The goal at each site would include developing partnerships and volunteers to assume maintenance responsibility of remaining amenities.

Alternative 1: No Action

These recreation areas would continue to be operated as in past years.

C. Past, Present and Reasonably Foreseeable Future Actions

There are no past, present and reasonably foreseeable treatments within the project areas

D. Protective Measures

In order to protect the environment and lessen possible negative impacts, the applicable measures contained in the Forest Wide (FW) Standards of the RLRMP and Management Area (MA) standards for the Ozark-St-Francis National Forests (OSFNF) would be applied to the PA and are incorporated in this EA. Best Management Practices (BMP) would apply as standard protective measures.

Forest Wide and Management Area standards which apply to this proposal:

FW79: Use only native or non-persistent nonnative species when seeding temporary openings from soil disturbing activities.

FW105: Projects will be designed to meet the assigned scenic integrity objectives (SIO) as defined.

FW115 Coordinate management direction with the State Historic Preservation Office, federally recognized tribes, and other appropriate state and federal agencies pursuant to Programmatic Agreement.

Management Area 1.H Scenic Byway Corridors

Present but proposed actions would not have a measurable effect on

Management Area MA2.A Ozark Highlands Trail

Present but proposed actions would not have a measurable effect on

Management Area 2.C Developed Recreation Areas

MA2.C-9 Developed sites and concentrated-use areas are inspected annually and high-risk conditions are corrected, mitigated, and identified to the public or the area is closed.

MA2.C-12 Management activities are designed to meet or exceed the assigned Scenic Integrity Objectives

Scenery Management

Page 2-20, RLRMP identifies Priorities for the analysis area as follows:

- Maintain or enhance the visual character of the Forests by using the Scenery Management System (SMS) to achieve scenic integrity objectives.

- Manage landscapes and build elements in order to achieve scenic integrity objectives.
- Promote the planning and improvement of infrastructure along scenic travel routes. Use the best environmental design practices to harmonize changes in the landscape and to advance environmentally sustainable design solutions.
- Restore landscapes to reduce visual effects on nonconforming features.
- Manage scenic restoration to be consistent with other management area objectives.
- Maintain the integrity of the expansive, natural landscapes, and traditional cultural features that provide the distinctive character of places. Maintain the character of key places in order to maintain their valued attributes.

E. Monitoring

- 1) Monitoring would be conducted to ensure that all erosion control measures are put in place and functioning.
- 2) A review of all known occurrences of proposed, endangered, threatened or sensitive species (PETS) has been conducted. In addition, field surveys have been conducted within the project area.

F. Site Specific Design Criteria

The following are site specific design criteria to minimize impacts created from the Proposed Action's vegetative treatments. The project designs below are specific for the project area:

- If any proposed, endangered, or threatened species are discovered prior to or during implementation, the project would be halted until the potential effects are determined and new criteria are in place if required.
- Follow the Native American Graves Protection Act plan of action for Ozark National Forest. Should human remains be discovered, all work would halt pending consultation with the appropriate Tribes.
- Due to the small affected area and positive visual impacts resulting from this proposal, a Landscape Architect was not consulted.

Chapter III

Environmental Effects

A. RECREATION/ VISUAL QUALITY

Existing Condition

The analysis area for recreation and visuals will be the same using the established recreation boundaries for each of the Recreation Areas, as follows:

- ❖ Alum Cove Trailhead parking area and day use area
- ❖ Haw Creek and Bayou Bluff follows the campground boundary

The Proposed Action

Recreation

Direct Effects

Since the picnic sites at Alum Cove are seldom used, the reduction of these sites will have little or no direct negative effect on recreational visitors that are traveling through.

Although toilet facilities would remain, long-term removal of the camp site amenities associated with Haw Creek and Bayou Bluff Campgrounds would have a direct negative effect on the recreational visitors that are traveling through and use the area as their overnight stop. Removing the camp site amenities would have a negative direct effect to the visitors that make their base camps as they day hike in the Ozark National Forest. In addition, potable water at Bayou Bluff would be closed. This would have little or minor direct negative effect on the recreational visitor that use the area. Currently, general maintenance requires flushing the water holding tank weekly due to lack of use (not enough visitors using the potable water).

Dispersed camping would still be allowed so traditional recreational users of Haw Creek and Bayou Bluff (ones that come there to camp year after year) could continue to use the area without some amenities. This would reduce the measurable direct negative effects of the proposed action. There would be a potential positive direct effect on the recreational visitors since the areas would be open year round (remove the seasonal closures).

Visual

There would be slight negative direct effect to visual resources if the proposed action is chosen but this would be a short-term effect until vegetation covered the disturbed area(s).

Recreation

Indirect Effects

Elimination of designated campsites allows visitors to camp anywhere. This could create an erosion issue along the stream bank due to concentration of recreational use associated with general dispersed camping. This would be an indirect negative effect.

Visual

Closure of the developed campground by removing the amenities would have little or no impact on the scenic integrity since vegetation impacts and ground disturbance would be minimally affected.

Recreation

Cumulative Effects

The overall impact to recreational use would be noticed more by the traditional recreational user; however, this is a proportionately small number of visitors to the Ozark National Forest. The displaced recreational user seeking camp site amenities would be negatively affected until they find an alternate site.

Visual

Since no other activities are planned in this area, there would be no measurable cumulative effects to visual resources.

Alternative 1: No Action

Recreation

Direct/Indirect/ Effects

Haw Creek Campground, Bayou Bluff Campground, and Alum Cove Recreation Area would continue as is with similar recreational use as before.

Visual

Current trends would continue and there would be no direct/indirect effects to visual resources other than what is already occurring.

Recreation

Cumulative Effects

Recreation would not measurably be affected. Use and maintenance efforts would continue to be the same as they currently are with increasing costs over time.

Visuals

With no activities being implemented, there would be no cumulative effects with this alternative.

B. HUMAN HEALTH FACTORS

Existing Condition

The campgrounds have been at their present location for at least 50 years. The area is moderately forested with some man-made features present (kiosks, picnic tables, trash cans, lantern posts, fire rings, etc.) within the boundaries of the campgrounds. The campground campsites have received what could be considered low-moderate use with some users staying over-night. A larger percentage of visitors, however, are day use participants usually staying for period of less than two hour duration to take pictures, relax, etc.,

Proposed Action

Direct Effects

With the Proposed Action, use by the public in the area would be about the same with less oversight, which would potentially increase the chance of someone being hurt by a hazard such as a dead tree falling. The risk to the public using the area generally would increase once the project was implemented. This would be a potential direct negative effect to human health and safety.

Indirect Effects

One temporary indirect negative effect would occur during the implementation phase of this project when the risk to the workers could be increased from operating heavy equipment. All OSHA applicable rules and regulations would be adhered to. Operating heavy equipment does involve some risk and workers implementing the proposal would most likely be participating in the same type of work, whether the Proposed Action is chosen or not so their exposure would likely be the same.

A potential indirect negative effect would be if more people than expected use the area for dispersed camping after removal of the amenities. It is possible that public health risk could be increased due to reduced patrols of the sites and remaining facilities.

Cumulative Effects

This area would be incrementally safer if there was less public use. The Proposed Action could potentially increase public safety issues in these concentrated use areas where less oversight would occur.

Alternative 1: (No Action)

Direct Effects

With this alternative, the current level of risk to the public would remain as it is because no activities would take place.

Indirect Effects

No activities would take place so there would be no indirect effects to human health and safety.

Cumulative Effects

If this alternative is chosen, the risk to human health and safety would not change so there would be no cumulative effects.

C. HERITAGE RESOURCES

Existing Condition

This project proposal falls under an existing Programmatic Agreement (PA) between the United States Forest Service, Native American federally-recognized Tribes, and the Arkansas State Historic Preservation Office. This area has received complete inventory under previous projects and additional archeological inventory has been completed in conjunction with this project. A determination of *no adverse effect* will be made for all historical properties. Report writing and consultation with SHPO and Tribes are continuing.

Proposed Action

Direct Effects of the Proposed Action

The area(s) have been previously surveyed, and any known sites have been recorded and would be avoided. Therefore, the Proposed Action would have no direct adverse effect to historical properties.

Indirect Effects of the Proposed Action

Since no sites would be affected, the Proposed Action would have no adverse effect to historical properties.

Cumulative Effects of the Proposed Action (PA)

No sites would be affected by this project. Therefore, the Proposed Action would have no adverse effect to historical properties.

Alternative 1 (No Action)

Direct Effects of Alternative 1

No activities would be implemented so there would be no adverse effect to historical properties.

Indirect Effects of Alternative 1

With this alternative, no activities would be implemented so there would be no adverse effect to historical properties.

Cumulative Effects of Alternative 1 (No Action)

No activities would be implemented so there would be no adverse effect to historical properties.

Chapter IV

Coordination and Consultation

The Forest Service consulted the following individuals, Federal, Tribal, State, and local agencies during the development of this environmental assessment:

ID Team Members by Location:

Ozark National Forest – Big Piney Ranger District:

Terry Hope - Recreation Assistant
Jim Dixon – Integrated Resources Team Leader
Dwayne Rambo - Wildlife Biologist
Rickey Adams – Engineering Technician
Sarah Davis – Wildlife Biologist
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Mike Mulford – NEPA Coordinator
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Brandon Bush – Heritage Resources Technician
Ryan Washam – Archeologist

Ozark National Forest – Supervisor’s Office:

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Kathy King – Writer/Editor
Amy Burt – Forest NEPA Coordinator

Ozark Highlands Trail Association

Steven Parker – President

Arkansas Archeological Survey

Scott Kaufman – Director
Dr. Ann Early – State Archeologist

Federal, Tribal, State, and Local Agencies:

Arkansas State Historic Preservation Office (SHPO)
US Fish and Wildlife Service
Edwina Butler-Wolfe, Governor, Absentee Shawnee Tribe
Tamara Francis, Chairman, Caddo Nation of Oklahoma
Chuck Hoskin Jr., Principal Chief, Cherokee Nation of Oklahoma
Gary Batton, Chief, Choctaw Nation of Oklahoma
Deborah Dotson, President, Delaware Nation
Glenna Wallace, Chief, Eastern Shawnee Tribe of Oklahoma
Cheryl Smith, Principal Chief, Jena Band of Choctaw Indians

James R. Floyd, Principal Chief, Muskogee (Creek) Nation
Geoffrey Standing Bear, Chief, Osage Nation
John Berrey, Chairman, Quapaw Tribe of Oklahoma
Ben Barnes, Chairman, Shawnee Tribe of Oklahoma
Ryan Morrow, Mekko, Thlopthlocco Tribal Town
Joe Bunch, Chief, United Keetoowah Band of Cherokee
Terry Parton, Chief, Wichita and Affiliated